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## The Ugly Truth: Insurgencies are Brutal

**Robert Bunker**

The recent release by [WikiLeaks.org](http://WikiLeaks.org) of over seventy thousand classified U.S. Military documents pertaining to the insurgency in Afghanistan has generated immense media and public interest and is being compared in scale to the release of the 'Pentagon Papers' in 1965 by Daniel Ellsberg. Immediate U.S. governmental condemnations concerning unnecessarily placing troops in harm's way, on the one hand, combined with war crimes accusations, on the other, have only served to heighten the rhetoric surrounding the posting of these documents on the Web. The criminal and unauthorized manner in which this massive volume of documents was leaked has only helped to further politicize and emotionally galvanize commentators taking sides on this issue.

The intent of this short essay is to move past the hype, rhetoric, and passions of the moment and get to the core of the issue at hand. The ugly truth has nothing to do with who released the documents, why they were released, or even what political outcomes and potential policy fallout will occur after the dust settles. The core issue at hand is that insurgencies, by their very nature, are inherently brutal. This point was recently driven home after doing a considerable amount of research and reflection on issues pertaining to insurgent use of targeted killing, via both the techniques of assassination and political execution, and engaging in subsequent discourse on this topic with insurgency warfare scholars and practitioners. Further sensitizing me to this truth is that, prior to the insurgent analysis, I was recently involved in an edited book project on Mexican drug cartels and the criminal insurgencies taking place within the lands of our Southern neighbor with over twenty-five thousand dead since December 2006.

What these research projects have taught me, or should I say have reminded me - as over time I have become detached, analytical, and emotionally shielded from the raw violence of the subject matter - is that insurgencies can be just as, if not more, brutal than conventional military engagements between opposing conventional armies. The release of this multitude of classified documents is bringing this home to the American public and the rest of the world. How long this heightened public awareness will last is unknown but, for the moment, a psychic emotional shockwave has been unleashed by the bombshell posting of these documents on WikiLeaks. Citizens of the United States, her friends, the neutral parties, and even her enemies are at the moment in a heightened state of awareness concerning US involvement in the face of insurgencies raging not only in Afghanistan but also in nearby Pakistan, in Iraq, and, for those somewhat more cognizant of politics, in many other quarters of the globe.

The crux of the problem is that democracies loathe being involved in insurgencies. They are nasty, brutish, and have a bad habit of being very drawn out. Afghanistan is now the longest U.S. ‘war’ on record if we can call it such. Both blood and treasure are often expended for no perceivable reason and, at times, no clear cut distinction exists between the good guys and the bad guys when loyalty can be bought and paid for in hard cash. Accountability can be non-existent and despotic and corrupt regimes gleefully siphon off U.S. aid to enrich themselves, their families, and their cronies. Hamid Karzai is in some ways a Ngo Dinh Diem or Nguyen Van Thieu *redux*. Memories of Vietnam are never far from the surface when insurgency becomes the topic of table discussion. In fact, Vietnam is an excellent touchstone with regard to the sheer brutality surrounding an insurgency. Richard Schultz published a 1978 work on terrorism, insurgency warfare, and the Viet Cong. Key statistical information on targeted killings, kidnappings, and the brutality of the conflict in Vietnam is as follows:

- Between 1958 and 1965, approximately 36,800 kidnappings and 9,700 assassinations occurred in South Vietnam
- ...during 1957 (the year given most frequently for the serious expansion of the NLF insurgency) a total of 472 officials were assassinated. This figure doubled during 1958-1959 and during the early 1960’s. The NLF eliminated on the average of fifteen GVN officials a week
- In May 1961, Kennedy sent a “Special message to Congress” in which he attributed NLF success to “guerillas striking at night, assassins striking alone—assassins who have taken the lives of over 4000 civil officers in the last 12 months...by subversives and saboteurs and insurrectionists, who in some cases control whole areas inside of independent nations.”<sup>1</sup>

These statistics are in addition to the better-known insurgent and allied campaigns. From the insurgent side, they pertain to casualties resulting from routine ambushes of U.S. patrols, meeting engagements and firebase sieges, and booby traps set on jungle routes to kill and maim U.S. troops. From the allied side, we of course have the U.S. ‘pacification campaigns’ at the “boots on the ground” level, in addition to liberal amounts of close air support and strategic bombing campaigns, targeted at the Viet Cong, North Vietnamese Army, and their supporters. U.S. military deaths tallied out to about 58,000, Viet Cong and NVA deaths are estimated at many times that level, while the indigenous populations caught in the middle of the mayhem suffered at far worse levels— somewhere between 3 to 6 million dead if Laotians and Cambodians are also included.<sup>2</sup>

Two mutually reinforcing strategies were thus being waged in Vietnam by the insurgents. The first was one of targeted killing, kidnapping, political execution, and re-indoctrinization, to create a shadow government. The second was a more overt guerilla campaign based on hit and run raids and terrorist acts. In return, the U.S. responded with its own targeted killing programs against the political cadre of the insurgents and fielded sizeable field forces to engage the armed guerrilla groups in the countryside, villages, and larger urban areas. The drawn out and nasty experience of the Vietnam conflict left the U.S. homefront visibly exhausted, shaken, and increasingly divided. Memories of the Tet Offensive in 1968, Kent State in 1970, and the fall of Saigon in 1975 are forever part of the greater American psyche as are the stark images of both that naked and burned Vietnamese child running on a road in terror after a napalm attack and the unsettling

extrajudicial execution of a Viet Cong agent by means of a pistol shot to the head by a South Vietnamese official.

Comparisons and mutterings of the historical American experience in Vietnam vis-à-vis the active insurgencies of Afghanistan and Iraq where U.S. soldiers are deployed are generally considered bad etiquette though, looking back, the same could be said of Lebanon—the Marine Barracks bombing in 1983 is still a relatively open wound—and Somalia—remember the 1993 Mogadishu debacle immortalized in the work *Black Hawk Down*. The intent is not to raise the specter of failure, though such potentials always exist, but rather to highlight the brutal nature of insurgency itself. Just as the insurgency in Vietnam has been brutally characterized above so too can we characterize those taking place in Afghanistan and Iraq. Readers, however, have no doubt personally experienced the graphic and dark news stories and imagery themselves now for almost a decade. No further discussion is thus deemed necessary though, compared to the earlier Vietnam conflict, U.S. casualties have been relatively low. The recent WikiLeaks has only reminded us of what we already know—that brutality, and even war crimes, are part and parcel of an insurgency environment even though our American citizens and others around the world would rather too soon forget.

Insurgents, the states they are engaging, and the defenders of those states, spend an inordinate amount of time and effort on concepts of legitimacy and illegitimacy, media spin, propaganda, and the ilk. In some ways, insurgency and counter-insurgency are raw politics and government at its most primal level. Who will ultimately govern, who will make decisions, and who will live or die hang in the balance. Since the attack of 9-11, the American government, for reasons which have been and continue to be contentious and hotly debated, has found itself locked in active and ongoing insurgencies in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Basic questions pertaining to what strategies to follow, i.e. whether we are willing to spill more American blood, and whether we even have the financial resources to even continue fighting—are continually being raised. The specter of cross border violence spilling over from the active narco-insurgencies in Mexico and the dire security threats in Central America stemming from cartel and gang violence are also increasingly gaining attention.

Within this broader context, the ugly truth that insurgencies are brutal must never be forgotten. Democracies have little stomach for them because too many gray areas exist—the just causes are quickly tarnished, allegations of war crimes and actual war crimes take place on all sides, and, as in all conflict and war, the indigenous populations caught in the middle suffer the most. Distressingly, more and more insurgencies are breaking out globally that seemingly require the attention, and ultimately the blood and financial resources, of the United States to respond to them. It is hoped, whatever administration is in power—be it Democrat or Republican—that wise, measured, and grand strategic decisions will be made. It is far easier to wreck the position and power of a state by undertaking the wrong international policies, especially as it pertains to undertaking foreign wars, than to build up or regain the power and prestige lost. America has been a great power throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What has been gained over the course of a century can be lost in only a few short years.

Thus, in a time of economic constraint and budget deficit, we must pick and choose which insurgencies to be involved in, whether our own troops or those of proxies will fight them, and

how encompassing our goals should be. Sometimes the limited mission of only mitigating the threat to the U.S. homeland may be sufficient. Making the appropriate decisions will ensure that we will be in a position of strength in the face of the specter of even more insurgencies on the horizon—some of which are in our backyard, especially if, we openly accept the brutal nature of the conflict that we are getting our troops into. Our intent is to ultimately fix our position as a great power throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the only way, as a nation, that we will be able to do this is conserve our resources when we can and only get mired in insurgencies when the core national security interests of the U.S. are imperiled. Such core interests should be openly debated. The fact that insurgencies are inherently brutal and once we commit our troops to the fight it is going to be a long haul need not be.

## Notes

1. Richard Schultz, “The Limits of Terrorism in Insurgency Warfare: The Case of the Viet Cong.” *Polity*. Vol. 11, No. 1. Autumn 1978: 76-77, 81, 85. Kennedy quote cited to John F. Kennedy, *Public Papers of the President, 1961*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1962: 347.
2. ‘Welcome to Vietnam War.com.’ <http://web.archive.org/web/20080604140842/http://www.vietnamwar.com/>.

*Dr. Robert J. Bunker holds degrees in political science, government, behavioral science, social science, anthropology-geography, and history. Training taken includes that provided by DHS, FLETC, DIA, Cal DOJ, Cal POST, LA JRIC, NTOA, and private security entities in counter-terrorism, counter-surveillance, incident-response, force protection, and intelligence. Dr. Bunker has been involved in red teaming and counter-terrorism exercises and has provided operations support within Los Angeles County. Past associations have included Futurist in Residence, FBI Academy, Quantico, VA; Counter-OPFOR Program Consultant (Staff Member), National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center—West, El Segundo, CA; Fellow, Institute of Law Warfare, Association of the US Army, Arlington, VA; Lecturer-Adjunct Professor, National Security Studies Program, California State University San Bernardino, San Bernardino, CA; instructor, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA; and founding member, Los Angeles County Terrorism Early Warning Group. Dr. Bunker has over 200 publications including short essays, articles, chapters, papers and book length documents. These include *Non-State Threats and Future Wars* (editor); *Networks, Terrorism and Global Insurgency* (editor); *Criminal-States and Criminal-Soldiers* (editor); *Narcos Over the Border* (editor); and *Red Teams and Counter-Terrorism Training* (co-author—forthcoming). He has provided over 200 briefings, papers, and presentations to US LE, MIL, GOV, and other groups in the US and overseas. He can be reached at [bunker@usc.edu](mailto:bunker@usc.edu).*

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